

Return with splendour

An ex-local's new ways of seeing old subjects

The common thread of botanical profusion that dominates artist Richard Dunlop's work can be directly attributed to a childhood spent in leafy Ashgrove.

He may live in Melbourne now, but his Brisbane roots are evident in his latest exhibition, *Classical Arrangements*. Fans of his botanical oeuvre will be well satisfied by a suite of those works in the show, but there are also new directions.

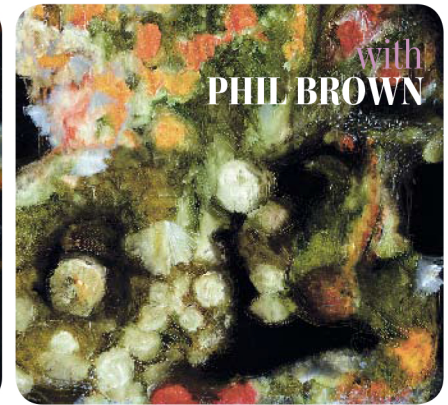
All the paintings are rich interpretations of Richard's rather organic universe. As the gallery's catalogue points out, "Dunlop ensures that his paintings are just as organic as his subjects."

Even classical musical instruments demonstrate a distinctly organic ambience and why wouldn't they? The violins in *Classical Arrangement* and *The Red Violin* are made from wood, after all, which is a kind of link back to the artist's botanical theme.

The Ashgrove childhood is distinctly referenced in the rather beautiful painting *Night Sky the Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Goya)*, which features flying fox shapes against a black background.

"My childhood memories are of fruit bats plundering the old mango tree that stood in our backyard," Richard recalls.

There's more going on here than meets the eye, however, and



ORGANIC COMPOSITIONS ... detail from Richard Dunlop's luminous oil on Belgian linen paintings, *Classical Arrangement*, *Blind Fish* and *Big Love*

the reference to Goya is a clue. The Spanish artist was persecuted for his free-thinking ways and while there may be no Spanish Inquisition breathing down Richard's neck, he has had his struggles along the way.

At times during his career, painting, for example, has been in and out of favour, but he has steadfastly stuck to his medium.

When he first began painting his large botanical works, the status and appeal of paintings seemed to be waning. But it has come back into fashion, to a degree at least, with collectors if not with all curators.

The alchemy that occurs in a painter's studio is what drives, inspires and sustains Richard, who creates his own worlds in his often richly detailed works.

In paintings such as *Big Love*, *Majolica* and *Nature*, fans of his botanical work will find much to delight them. There is the familiar tangle of plant life with flowers and leaves and stems all fighting for control. *Old Golden Bowl* blurs the lines a little and has a distinctly metaphysical look enhanced by the dark void that takes up at least half the canvas. The dark backgrounds of many of the works also hark back to his life in Brisbane.

"In the early '90s, I had a studio under a house at Windsor,"

Richard explains. "I lined the open wooden slats with black garden plastic to keep the dust and rain out. Many works of animals and plants back then ended up with a black background because that was what I was looking at all the time. My work travels in cycles, and this is a returning wave."

There are also works inspired by marine life. Richard collected tropical fish as a boy and was entranced by some colonial pictures of fish that he saw in the Art Gallery of South Australia.

That sense of wonder is reflected in *Blind Fish* and also, perhaps, in *Reef Arrangement*, a vibrant piece featuring marine creatures displayed as artefacts against his signature darkness.

All the works are rich and aesthetically pleasing and Richard has no problem with the artistic ideal of beauty. But his paintings are not glibly attractive and they do suggest hidden depths.

The gorgeous flowers in *Memorial Wreath* may be lovely, but they are also passing fancies in a world where life, death and renewal are constant realities. And that's as it should be.

RICHARD DUNLOP - CLASSICAL ARRANGEMENTS, until May 5, Tue-Sat, 10am-5pm, Jan Murphy Gallery, 486 Brunswick St, Fortitude Valley, ph: 3254 1855. www.janmurphygallery.com.au